

CONFLICTS IN RELIGIOUS LIFE IN CSONGRÁD IN THE EARLY 19th CENTURY

REACTIONS AND ATTEMPTED SOLUTIONS

Abstract: The article examines the conflict-fraught tenure of János Mátyus as parish priest of Csongrád (1802-1827), and evaluates the consequences and the reactions of the parishioners. Above all, it seeks an answer to the question of the qualities on which a person was judged to be a “good priest”, who and what were regarded as incompatible with the ideal priest. How did the faithful express their disapproval of the priest who violated norms and how did the atypical behaviour of the Csongrád parish priest create what could be regarded as a collective “spiritual crisis situation”?

Keywords: lower clergy, Csongrád, norm and norm violation, lesser nobility, parish history

Historians and ethnologists in Hungary dealing with the social role of the lower clergy typically focus their analyses on questionable cases and conflicts that caused a stir.¹ The reason behind this is the assumption that atypical phenomena allow an insight into deep layers of social reality that, in the absence of conflict, would remain hidden.² Thus, community reactions to priestly norm violations can throw light on cultural and tradition-based aspects pointing beyond themselves, and reveal sensitive boundaries between norm and norm violation.³

In this study I examine the conflict-fraught tenure of János Mátyus as parish priest of Csongrád (1802-1827), and evaluate the reactions of the parishioners. I seek an answer to the question of the qualities on which someone was judged to be a “good priest”, and who was regarded as incompatible with the ideal of the good priest? How did the parishioners express their disapproval of the norm-violating priest and how did the atypical behaviour of the Csongrád parish priest create a kind of collective “spiritual crisis situation”?

I begin my analysis with a description of the town concerned, then of the parish priest János Mátyus. This is followed by the letters of complaint written about the parish priest and the grievances set out in the complaints, that is, the conflict

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1 See, for example. BEDNÁRIK 2013; GYÖNGYÖSSY 2014; HEGYI 2015; S. LACKOVITS 2012. On the research history and methodological problems of the topic, see: BÁRTH 2013.

2 See Edoardo GRENDI's *exceptionally* normal concept! SZÍJÁRTÓ M. 2006. 513.

3 BEDNÁRIK 2013. 223.

situations and the attempts to resolve them, and finally the reactions of the parishioners in Csongrád. The majority of my sources are ecclesiastical: letters written to the diocesan bishop of Vác, visitation protocols, Holy See (*Sancta Sedes*, Holy Chair or Episcopal See) interrogation records, less often newspaper articles and minutes of the local assembly.

The town of Csongrád in the early 19th century

In the early 19th century Csongrád was a Roman Catholic settlement inhabited by Hungarians. A census taken in 1827 found 11,283 persons in 1228 houses, among them ten Jews and two Protestants.⁴ The majority of the inhabitants of Csongrád were serfs farming plots of land, and cotters on the big estates, but in the first decades of the 19th century there had been an increase in the number of guilds.

The holder of the advowson⁵ of the Saint Roche filial church in the Inner Town was the municipality, while in the case of the parish church of Our Lady it was the landowner count, the Károlyi family of Nagykároly. Csongrád had the appearance of a typical market town: it was surrounded by a giant ring of good quality plough land, with vineyards in the northern part, and lay beside the Tisza River, an abundant source of fish.

Our sources speak with recognition about the religious life of the people of Csongrád; the church was full to overflowing for mass, the many wayside crosses were well tended, charitable donations to the church were substantial. Veneration of the various patron saints of produce and farm animals was a special feature in the religious life of the population of fishermen and people who made a living from agriculture.⁶

The Franciscan fathers who came from the monastery in Kecskemét and a few from Szeged were permanent helpers of the Csongrád parish priests, self-sacrificing pastors of the parishioners. Already during Turkish times, their way of life won the support and sympathy of the people and this attachment further strengthened in the course of the 19th century. The superior of the Salvatorian monastery in Kecskemét⁷ always ensured the presence of at least one mendicant brother in Csongrád, who was active as *procurator*⁸ working for the salvation of the people living far from the church, among the isolated farms and filials: they

4 FÜZESI 1963-66, 189.

5 *Advowson*: A privilege granted by the pope or king, independent of land ownership. In a few places as late as the early 20th century patrons holding the advowson provided the parish properties and lands, built and repaired the church. When a vacancy arose they could make a proposal to the diocesan bishop regarding the successor. TOMISA 1997, 171.

6 For more detail on veneration of the saints in Csongrád, see: GYÖNGYÖSSY 2010.

7 *Szalvatorians, observant* (*Strictioris observantiae*): The aim of the trend that spread from Italy was a strict return to the rules laid down by Saint Francis. The movement appeared in Hungary in the 14th century. For more detail, see: MÁLYUSZ 2007, 272.

8 *Procurator*: Monk in charge of an alms or pastoral territory. M. KAT. LEX. IV. 751.

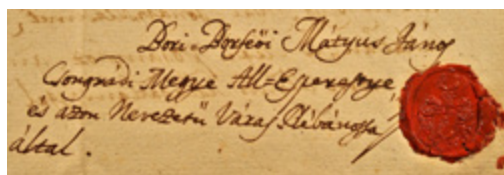
heard confession, conducted funerals, baptised, gave the last rites, and at the special request of the parish priest also said mass and preached.

At the turn of the 18th to the 19th century András Kanyó, a learned priest was the Csongrád parish priest. He devoted special attention to education for the common people, making sure they knew the church teachings and heard edifying sermons. András Kanyó was especially diligent in beautifying and enriching the church of Our Lady. He made a very effective speech calling for donations for the new bell and had it entered into the *Historia Domus*.⁹ Kanyó died in exceptional circumstances: "He consecrated the big stone cross at the big church on 11th July 1802. The following day he died on the way to Vác, and now lies dead in Nagybony [...]. He died in 1802, but he is not dead, because he lives in his learning and zeal, in his piety and examples."¹⁰ The people of Csongrád mourned their educated priest for a long while. After his death János Mátyus who was 42 years old at the time was transferred to Csongrád in 1802 from neighbouring Csépa.

János Mátyus parish priest

The ancestors of parish priest János Mátyus (1761-1830) received their letters patent with armorial bearings¹¹ from King Rudolf in Prague in the 16th century.¹² The family probably moved from Borfő beside the Bor river to Domony some time in the early 18th century.

We first come across the Mátyus family in documents related to the regulation of socage in Domony, as one of the seven land-owning families. According to the census of 1767-68, three serfs with plots of land and three cotter families lived on the estate owned by Pál, the elder brother of the parish priest Mátyus.¹³ In 1808 40-year-old Pál Mátyus and his wife were listed as the owners; in 1820 the name of János Mátyus, then parish priest in Csongrád, appeared among the Domony land-owners.¹⁴



Signature of János Mátyus "Bori-Borfői" VPL APriv. Mátyus János, 1830's

⁹ Archive of the Parish of Our Lady, Csongrád (hereinafter: NPI) *Historia Domus*, vol. I.

¹⁰ TARI 1977. 13.

¹¹ *Noble with armorial bearings*: A rank of nobility earned through feats of arms, it was not accompanied by a grant of land.

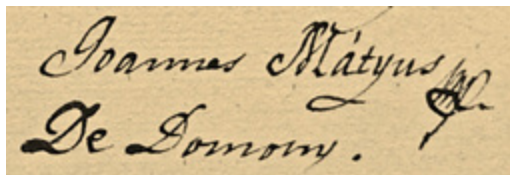
¹² NAGY 1857. 273-274.

¹³ PÓR – ASZTALOS 1989. 112.

¹⁴ For a brief overview of the members of the Mátyus family in Domony, see: PÓR – ASZTALOS 1989. 124-125.

We have no reliable information on the real wealth of the Mátyus family, we can only assume that they were a moderately well-to-do land-owning family. One thing is certain: in the period concerned the lack of land was a general problem in Domony, and the Mátyus estate was divided among at least¹⁵ four children.

János Mátyus graduated from the seminary in Pest; his first appointment was as chaplain in Miskolc, then in Kiskunfélegyháza, from 1792 he was parish priest of Csépa. With a helping hand from József Steösszel, captain of the Jazygians and Cumans, János Mátyus was transferred to the suddenly vacant position at the head of the Csongrád parish.¹⁶ It is clear from the dossier on his person containing hundreds of pages accumulated during his years in Csongrád that the people of the town did not feel honoured by his presence. In 1825 the Bishop of Vác, tired of the complaints from parishioners, forced János Mátyus to resign from the parish.¹⁷ The former parish priest went into retirement in Domony where he spent the remaining three years of his life trying to contrive his return to Csongrád.



Another form of signature: János Mátyus "de Domony" VPL APriv. MÁTYUS János, 1830's

Now, let us examine in brief points exactly what those letters of complaint and the testimony recorded by the canons of Vác contained concerning the reasons for the crisis in the Csongrád church community, and that described the actual conflicts.

Norm violations and complaints

The letters of complaint about parish priest Mátyus and the testimony recorded set out in detail the problems that arose in Csongrád in the performance of liturgical and pastoral duties.

1) *The neglect of pastoral tasks*

If none of the three chaplains was at home, the parish priest made the infant to be baptised or the sick person to receive the last rites wait until one of them

¹⁵ The names of four siblings appear in the available sources: Pál, János, Erzsébet and András, but it cannot be excluded that there were also other inheritors.

¹⁶ TARI 1977. 13.

¹⁷ CHOBOT 1917. 839.

returned. Personal tragedies occurred because of this, people died without confession.¹⁸ He himself only administered a sacrament (baptism, marriage, last rites), generally to more prosperous townsfolk or guild members, in exchange for a gift.¹⁹ If he was to say mass, he began almost an hour late. In winter this annoyed the people of Csongrád because of the cold, in summer because of the time lost from work.²⁰ Another complaint made against him was that he allowed his chaplains to say only two masses a day which meant that the church was crowded on these occasions; people were pressed together, someone always fainted.²¹

2) *The neglect of religious education*

According to the letters of complaint the Csongrád parish priest never gave religious education or spiritual teaching,²² he neglected the cause of enlightening the people. Indeed: if he wanted to convince the faithful of something at any cost, he would draw on popular superstitions. When János Mátyus heard that a family in mourning did not want to have an expensive Requiem mass²³ said, he warned them that they would deeply regret the decision, “when the soul returning home props a sack against the door, throws down the pots in the kitchen”.²⁴

3) *Arbitrarily imposing and raising surplice fees*

In addition to the fees set out in the *Canonica Visitatio*,²⁵ János Mátyus introduced new “taxes”. In the 1820s–30s he asked parishioners to pay 1 forint as *waiting money* to hear the cantor sing the funeral valediction; he gave half of this sum to the chaplain performing the service – “if he remembered”.²⁶ For a wedding

18 “If the respected parish priest was called to hear confession [...] he would not go, but said that the chaplains would come [...] [in this way] two women died without the last rites.” Vác Episcopal and Capitular Archive, *Acta Privatorum* (hereinafter: VPL APriv.) János Mátyus, 16 May 1823. Letter from the Magistrate and Council of Csongrád to the Episcopal See of Vác.

19 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol, testimony of József Urgasz.

20 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 May 1823. Letter from the municipal magistrate of Csongrád to the Bishop of Vác.

21 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol, testimony of András MAKAI.

22 “He does not hold spiritual teaching for young people, instruction in religion obviously suffers and they grow up without it.” VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 May 1823. Letter from the municipal magistrate of Csongrád to the Bishop of Vác.

23 *Requiem mass*: lat. “rest”. This was the name given after the Council of Trent to the mass said in black vestments for the repose of the souls of the dead. The requiem mass was given its name from the first word of the *introit*, the first prayer: *Requiem in aeternam dona eis Domine* (Grant them eternal rest, O Lord). M. KAT. LEX. XI. 2006. 574.

24 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 May 1823. Letter from the municipal magistrate of Csongrád to the Bishop of Vác.

25 *Canonica Visitatio*: lat. “canonical visitations”, the inspection of parishes. In Hungary we have data from the 12th century on protocols written by bishops or vicars general, covering questions compiled by the bishop. The Council of Trent (1545–63) regulated the course and frequency of such visitations. TOMISA 2002.

26 APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1824. Testimony of chaplain Ferenc Kovács.

on Sunday two large hens were added to the usual fees.²⁷ He charged 20 forints for the consecration of new guild banners, and 10 forints for the banners of the “ancient guilds” to be placed in the church sanctuary. News of the unusual extra income being demanded by the Csongrád parish priest reached the bailiff of the Károlyi estate who called on the guilds to refuse payment.²⁸

4) *Violation of religious commands*

In return for a suitable payment parish priest Mátyus was prepared to overstep even the most basic church regulations. He set his fee for a wedding during Lent at 15 forints.²⁹ If the church service ordered was not in the end provided, he did not refund the payment, saying: “it is difficult to prise out anything that falls into the hands of the priests”. When the son of the guild master Pál Miskoltzi died, the service was conducted in “ordinary” vestment instead of a black cope; the parish priest offered to count the difference towards the costs if his other child died. There were problems at other times too with the respect of church regulations. Witnesses claimed they saw the parish priest’s servants carrying water, stripping corn, baking bread on feast days or Sundays, that is, breaking the Sabbath.³⁰

5) *Violation of moral norms*

All these shortcomings and “transgressions” appear to be especially serious sins, given that the parish priest was considered to be the chief guardian of moral order. People turned to him if discord arose between marriage partners, if justice had to be done in family affairs, to persuade people to drop grievances against others. If parishioners turned to a priest with a complaint concerning their private affairs, the general procedure was for the priest to examine the complaint and then call the parties concerned to discuss the matter together. But according to the letters of complaint, in return for a calf parish priest Mátyus did not call in the party in the wrong, for example the wife who had fled, or the husband who had committed adultery.³¹

²⁷ VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 16 May 1823. Letter from the municipal magistrate and council of Csongrád to the Vác Episcopal See.

²⁸ “I wished to have our banners moved from the rear of the church to the sanctuary, so that new guilds that have registered themselves do not place their banners before ours and so gain priority in some form.” VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of János Úveges. For further details of the affair, see: Gyöngyössi 2013.

²⁹ VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of László Ketskés.

³⁰ VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 16 May 1823. Letter from the municipal magistrate and council of Csongrád to the Vác Episcopal See. See also: VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of Veronika Lovas.

³¹ VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of András Makai.

The parish priest himself was suspected of fornication in three cases. First a girl working as a servant of the rectory gave birth to a child from an unknown father³², then the priest's housekeeper, a woman called Lizi, although she was a married woman, twice remained in the rectory when she gave birth. The witnesses named this housekeeper as the main cause of the local disputes as the parish priest took her word unconditionally. Ignoring the annoyance of parishioners, János Mátyus drove around the streets of Csongrád in a carriage with his housekeeper. Once after a funeral he seated Lizi beside himself in the carriage, in place of his chaplains. As József Urgasz, former Csongrád chaplain, said in his testimony:

"If someone has any business at the rectory, he first goes to the cook because they say that 'Lizi can arrange everything'".³³

When the housekeeper was sick, the parish priest nursed her, on one occasion in the presence of several witnesses, he rubbed fat on her³⁴.

6) Violation of the norms of social contact

János Mátyus was also accused of paying no attention to the opinion of parishioners and behaving insensitively. On one occasion, claiming that he was ill, he left his chaplains to conduct the Easter Resurrection mass. During the mass he drove out to the rectory's farm with his sister, and returned to Csongrád just as the procession was beginning. When

"the people were praying with the greatest piety outside the church, without deviating from his path, disturbing them in their devotions, he practically drove his carriage through their midst".³⁵

In many cases the witnesses spoke of the parish priest swearing. This in itself is scandalous, but is even more so if the priest mentioned the devil or sexual things – and according to the witnesses this happened regularly.³⁶

32 "The Csongrád parish priest not only freely fornicated with Judith Frajstadt, a young servant girl, but when this girl became pregnant, after her maternal instincts were stamped out she caused herself to have a miscarriage and buried the foetus in the yard of the rectory". VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 3 November 1807. Testimony given in Szegvár, at the court judging prisoners in Csongrád county (János Lévai Tóth).

33 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of József Urgasz.

34 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of Mrs Mihály Eszes née Katalin Csordás. *Rubbing*: A special form of healing in which the patient's body was massaged, pressed or stroked either dry or damp (with oil), at times with medicinal herbs. See: MAGYAR NÉPRAJZI LEXIKON [HUNGARIAN ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ETHNOLOGY], under the heading "gyógyító" (healing). <http://mek.oszk.hu/02100/02115/html/2-830.html>. Accessed on 08 November 2015.

35 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 16 May 1823. Letter from the municipal magistrate and council of Csongrád to the Vác Episcopal See.

36 VPL APriv. János Mátyus 12 August 1825. Investigation protocol. Testimony of János Seres.

In addition to all this we must mention the parish priest's nature: he did not tolerate contradiction and was quick to anger. He beat his servants³⁷ or anyone who aroused his anger, with a stick, a pizzle, or his own hands. A number of similar cases came before the municipality and the Vác episcopal see.³⁸ János Czimmermann, a hatter, had the town's surgeon draw up a description of the injuries caused to him by the parish priest,³⁹ then travelled in person with this certificate to Vác, to have him called to account. Despite an investigation drawn out over several years, the hatter remained without compensation for the case that had cost him close to 1000 forints in expenses.

The event that finally led to the suspension of János Mátyus was when he chased his chaplains Rosemerszky and Géczi with a bayoneted rifle around the rectory but he tripped and they escaped. There is a thick dossier of papers on the case in the Vác Episcopal and Capitular Archive. It is an indication of the significance of the case that it was recorded in peasant diaries, even though the facts there are not correct.⁴⁰

Conflicts and reactions

Now, let us see how the parishioners evaluated the parish priest's behaviour, what their attitude to it was and what they did to remedy the situation.

Comparisons to the parish priest, spread by word of mouth are formulas that aptly express and report on the problems. Speaking of the parish priest who sent children home without baptism, the midwives said that

"it would be easier to tempt the dragon out of its cave than the Reverend father from his house".⁴¹

Even more frequent remarks were made about the parish priest's neglect of his duties:

"People grumbled, saying: Shame! Shame, he should carry the Sacrament on such an important day, not go out to the farm".⁴²

³⁷ "That the Reverend Father is full of anger I know from my own experience, as he often threatens me with his sword in the stable, once he stabbed me in my side with the sword and if God had not taken such care of me, I do not know what would have happened." VPL APriv. János Mátyus 12 August 1825. Investigation protocol. Testimony of József Horváth, rectory coachman.

³⁸ "In 1808 he [János Mátyus] grievously beat József Angyal, a soldier, who approached the municipality with a request for compensation" Füzesi 1963-66. 181.

³⁹ VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 6 August 1822. Certificate on the injuries suffered by János Czimmermann, a hatter, signed by András Werner, Tamás Bernitzky surgeons.

⁴⁰ "On 18 August 1825, dean János Mátyus brawled with chaplain Rozembertzki. For which dean János Mátyus was summoned to Vác and remained there." Tari 1977.

⁴¹ VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of Pál Miskoltzi.

⁴² VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of Pál Miskoltzi.

The next stage was to make written complaints about the parish priest, at first to the local magistracy, then to the diocesan bishop. The most detailed letter was written on 10 July 1823 on the basis of complaints made to the Csongrád town council. The letter was composed jointly by the magistrate and the notary, it was then read in the general assembly, approved by the council members, and sent in the town's own carriage to the Vác Episcopal See.⁴³ The accusations essentially include the norm violations outlined in the previous chapter. The diocesan bishop instructed Vác diocesan arch-deacons to conduct an investigation into the contents of the letter. The questions were drawn up by the Vác Episcopal See and the investigation could not depart from them. The arch-deacons came in pairs to Csongrád to record the testimony of as many as 30-40 witnesses. Successive investigations were carried out, either because of new complaints that arose, or for a revision of testimony – the latter was always requested by the Csongrád parish priest. The episcopal investigation⁴⁴ resulted in further sources, protocols and testimonies.

A great part of both the letters of complaint and the testimonies describes the state of mind of the community, stressing the emotional harm:

“Generally speaking, everyone feels a deep hatred for János Mátyus dean and Csongrád parish priest [...] No one has the slightest trust, affection or respect for him, his parishioners appear before him out of duty, in fear and trembling.”⁴⁵

The outline of the state of mind is followed by a detailed account of the specific case, with names and place, set out in points for the Holy See.

The letters and testimonies generally end with requests and suggested solutions. In the case of János Mátyus they regarded a transfer or retirement as an acceptable alternative:

“We humbly beseech that you send and appoint another parish priest in his [János Mátyus's] place”.⁴⁶

“The people often say they wish he would be taken away; if only he would go away to rest in his old age, God willing. People

43 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 2 March 1825. Investigation protocol. Testimony of Pál Kása.

44 In disciplinary matters involving priests, the diocesan bishop judged through the regional vicar general and the Episcopal Holy See Court (in terminology of the period: *Szentszék* – Holy See). Accordingly, the priest's immediate superior was the regional vicar general delegated with (transferred) power by the diocesan bishop. It was the task of the regional vicar general to coordinate the work of the priests in his district, supervise the church and liturgical order, and visit all the parishes at least once a year. He is the one who could conduct hearings and inspections in disciplinary matters involving priests. During the period examined here the parish priests of Csongrád belonged under the supervision of the vicar general of Hódmezővásárhely.

45 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of József Urgasz.

46 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 7 July 1823. Letter from the municipal magistrate and council of Csongrád to the Vác Episcopal See.

think that he will go to Vác as a chaplain, or that he will retire to Domony"⁴⁷.

According to his former chaplain János Mátyus was unfit for priestly service because of his cruelty, while others thought the "derangement" of his mind made him unfit.⁴⁸

At times the witnesses make threats regarding what would happen if the episcopal see did not act in the case:

"People are so discontented that, if he remains among us, we will all become Lutherans."⁴⁹

The threat of conversion was not always just empty words: in the 18th century the inhabitants of a settlement in Transdanubia converted to the Calvinist faith to free themselves of their hated priest.⁵⁰ We do not know of any individual or group conversions in Csongrád during that period.

The hatter János Czimmermann who was beaten blamed the parish priest's cruelty and the chaplain's procrastination for the crisis of his pious spiritual life:

"Reckon before God for the fact that *I lost my faith* because the Priest, out of pride and anger drove his poor sheep undeservedly out of the holy fold that he vowed to serve in the name of Jesus Christ, giving him to the wolf and never bringing him back"⁵¹.

Parallel with the growing discontent of the parishioners, passive resistance against the parish priest also increased. The number of persons attending mass fell, especially among inhabitants from the more distant filials who declined to make the long trip. Some of those who came for mass grew tired of waiting and left after half an hour. Because the parish priest demanded a substantial sum for the consecration of wayside crosses there was a sharp decline in donations of this nature, and some of the newly erected crosses went for years without being consecrated.⁵² In the final analysis the dissatisfaction of parishioners was manifested in a decline in the practice of religion.⁵³

47 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 2 March 1825. Investigation protocol. Testimony of Pál Jusztin.

48 "In general it is his belief that he is totally unsuited to be a priest because he is exceedingly cruel." VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 12 August 1825. Investigation protocol. Testimony of chaplain János Seres. "I see from his gaze, his deeds and his speech that he is no longer in his right mind." VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of Pál Miskoltzi.

49 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of Mihály Gyarmati.

50 Information from Emőke S. Lackovits.

51 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 9 January 1826. Letter from János Czimmermann, hatter, to the Csongrád chaplain.

52 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 16 May 1823. Letter from the municipal magistrate and council of Csongrád to the Vác Episcopal See.

53 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 16 May 1823. Letter from the municipal magistrate and council of Csongrád to the Vác Episcopal See.

Society's judgement of the "disorderly" parish priest and attempts to resolve the conflict

A number of testimonies summed up the performance of János Mátyus in a single word, *disorderly*, or rather, a lack of order.⁵⁴ The failure to respect moral norms endangered the community's traditional norms and weakened it; this fear for the moral order can also be felt from the complaints made by parishioners:

"Because of him [i.e. the parish priest] people now feel that they are free to swear, fornicate, commit adultery, act violently, work on the Sabbath, etc."⁵⁵

The judgement of János Mátyus was aggravated by the fact that the majority of parishioners in Csongrád had accepted and were sincerely fond of his predecessor. In a number of letters they compare the old and new order – or rather, the lack of order (autocracy) – measuring the actions of János Mátyus against those of András Kanyó.⁵⁶ As the agricultural labourer Jakab Takács said in his testimony:

"We have all become estranged from him [from János Mátyus] because the good order that existed under the deceased Reverend father Kanyó no longer exists."⁵⁷

This series of shortcomings was compounded by the conflict-prone personality of János Mátyus, his quick-tempered, aggressive nature that was only further strengthened by his *sense of himself as a noble*.

The picture of the Csongrád parish priest that emerges from the letters faithfully reflects all the stereotypes of behavioural sociology that are generally repeated in connection with the minor nobility of the period. They include aggressiveness, the abuse of power and an exaggerated sense of self-importance. Earlier, as parish priest of Csépa, the only curial (noble) village in the neighbouring micro-region of Tiszazug, he had declared that:

"I am two nobles, I can beat a nobleman too."⁵⁸

54 "He does not keep any order at all in the service of the Lord"; [...] there is no order in his office." VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of Mihály Szabó and Jakab Takács.

55 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of Jakab Takács.

56 It is rarely stressed that there is almost never a *tabula rasa* for a community's spiritual leader; he naturally joins in the chain of local tradition and memory. He has to face and deal with points of reference, memory patterns, reflections and comparisons regarding his predecessor in office. His tasks and the area requiring pastoration also depend on the "legacy" left to him.

57 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of Jakab Takács.

58 VPL APriv. János Mátyus. 23 August 1799. Investigation protocol. Testimony of János Szilágyi.

He regarded himself as noble both by virtue of his ancestors, and of his membership of the priesthood.

Coming from Csépa to Csongrád, a settlement inhabited largely by serfs and cotters, he spoke with undisguised disdain of the parishioners he called “unworthy, shabby” peasants, including among them the town magistrate, the councilors and all those who gave testimony against him.⁵⁹ In two letters he wrote from Csongrád, he cites a passage from Werbőczy’s *Tripartitum*⁶⁰ that says in essence:

“He who believes a peasant, is worse than a murderer.”⁶¹

The solution was to keep alive the proposal and constantly push for the parish priest’s transfer, and also to make increasing use of the chaplains and the mendicant Franciscan father active in the district. After a while, not only did the parish priest refuse to administer the sacraments, whenever they could the parishioners preferred to turn to the mendicant Franciscan father and the chaplains. Another possibility was to approach other parish priests in the area; there are sources recording this practice.⁶²

We can only suspect the reasons for the lenient behaviour of the Vác Episcopal See. It is certain that in his letters János Mátyus made numerous references to his influential acquaintances, his excellent relations with the Károlyi estate, and his kinship ties to the Steössel family in Tiszaug. The contradictory attitude of the fellow archdeacons and chaplains conducting the investigation is also instructive. For example, after the suspension of János Mátyus, in one of his letters György Nagy archdeacon and parish priest in Cegléd tried to convince the Bishop of Vác that exiling parish priest Mátyus to Domony would do more harm to the judgement of the lower clergy than leaving him unmolested in Csongrád. As he put it:

“The Hungarian Catholic priesthood is the first in the world among the bright stars of the round heavens and [it is my wish that] this shining light should not be further dimmed by removing Mr János Mátyus from the true Church of Jesus Christ.”⁶³

59 Csongrád County Archive of the Hungarian National Archive, Csongrád Branch Archive (hereinafter: MNL CsML CsL) Cs. V.B. 42.e. The people of Csongrád recognised as “real” nobles only members of the family of the former landlord-holder of avowson, who did not even have residences in the settlement and whose visits were a real sensation. The social weight of the nobles listed in the birth registers was insignificant. In 1829 only 53 nobles had the right to vote in Csongrád. FÜZESI 1963-66. 190.

60 The “Tripartite Book” (*Tripartitum*) of István Werbőczy completed in 1514 was a collection of the feudal laws on Hungary in that period; it remained in use right up to 1848. See: CSIKY 1899.

61 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, s.d. 1824. Letter from János Mátyus to the Bishop of Vác.

62 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Investigation protocol. Testimony of Mihály Gyarmati.

63 VPL APriv. János Mátyus, 19 July 1826. Letter from György Nagy, archdeacon, parish priest of Cegléd to the Bishop of Vác.

In the end his plan to return to Csongrád was not realised; because of his deteriorating physical condition János Mátyus was unable even to travel to Vác to have his contested cases heard.

After the departure of Mátyus the Csongrád parishioners “looked for a priest for themselves”: they chose László Szabó then serving in Kiskundorozsma, whose personal qualities were known to them because he had earlier been a chaplain in Csongrád for four years. He promised to be excellently suited to carry on the spiritual guidance of the Csongrád parish community from where András Kanyó left it in 1802 – but that is another story.

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